

## Asian researchers study pill safety

Marjorie Koblinsky

**AN** estimated 25 million women in the developing countries of Asia use oral contraceptives. Yet research studies continue to suggest a link between regular use of "the pill" and various diseases of the circulatory system, particularly thrombosis.

Most of the current research, however, has been carried out in the West, especially in the United States and Britain. In late 1976 a meeting of Asian researchers concerned with areas of safety of contraceptives that needed further investigation, was sponsored by the IDRC. Oral contraceptives emerged as a main priority, and since that time a number of research projects have begun to investigate the health risks to Asian women taking the pill.

In Hong Kong, where an increase in female patients with heart ailments was noted between 1969 and 1975. A systematic and in-depth review is being carried out of the records of women admitted for heart ailments to determine the extent of the increase, and whether there may be a link between the increase in frequency of the disease and the use of oral contraceptives.

Another study in Hong Kong will investigate the relationship between oral contraceptive use and antithrombin in III — a natural anticoagulant that appears to be diminished in people suffering from thromboembolism. Over a period of one year, 100 oral contraceptive users who are scheduled for pelvic surgery will be compared with 100 non-users, matched for age diagnosis and type of surgery. At the same time a comparison of Chinese and Caucasian users and non-users will be made to determine if there are any differences in the effects of the pill on the two ethnic groups.

Changes in glucose tolerance and insulin metabolism have also been noted in oral contraceptive users. An IDRC-funded Inter-University Collaborative Fertility Project has now shown apparent differences in the changes among Asian and Caucasian women.

Researchers from the Universities of Singapore, Malaya and North Sumatra showed that, whereas both groups of women had decreased glucose tolerance and slightly elevated insulin levels, only Western women showed a marked increase in cholesterol levels — an increase that may not be reversible. There were however, inconsistencies in the data, and further analyses are now being carried out.

Another problem associated with use of the pill is hypertension. Studies in the US and Britain have shown different reactions among black and white women, but other groups have not been so well studied. At Yonsei University in Seoul, the IDRC is supporting studies on the effects of oral contraceptives on metabolic changes related to hypertension in Korean women.

The Seoul researchers will also investigate the possibility that contraceptive steroids can be passed to the infant through the mother's milk, and the effect this might have on the breast-fed baby. This is an area of oral contraceptive research that has not previously been widely investigated.

A recent Ford Foundation study warned that a great deal more attention (and funding) must be given to "studies of intermediate and long-term safety of methods of fertility regulation now widely used, and new methods yet to be developed." Asia's researchers are well aware of that need, and their efforts to seek the safest possible methods continue to receive IDRC support. □

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Every young and developing country expects a lot from good internal communications. Priorities are numerous but road construction is always near the top of the list. It is hoped that along with the roads, better services and increased incomes for the rural people will follow. But how does this happen in reality?

A research team in Southeast Asia has recently come up with a detailed set of facts to describe this reality. Under the supervision of Dr Niew Shong Tong from the Geography Department of Nanyang University, in Singapore, and Dr Lim Heng Kow from the same department but formerly with the University of Malaya, in Kuala Lumpur, the researchers studied the extremely heterogeneous State of Sarawak, in Eastern Malaysia.

Ethnically, geographically and socio-economically, Sarawak is made up of very different entities. The urban centres are predominantly populated by Chinese who migrated to Sarawak generations ago, while the rural areas are populated by some Chinese farmers and 24 indigenous groups.

The land itself is divided into three parallel strips with a central hilly region bordered by swamps on the China Sea coast and on the interior by mountains. The advanced sector of the economy is almost the exclusive lot of the Chinese while the Malays, on the coast, and the Ibans, Bidayuh and Kayans of the interior either fish or practice shifting agriculture.

For a long time, the numerous rivers that slice through the three strips of terrain were the only means of communication and transportation. Virtually all settlements were situated beside the sea or along a river. Before the last World War there was only a single mile of paved road in all Sarawak. But since the independence of Malaysia in 1963 the government has launched one ambitious plan after another to build a modern network of roads in Sarawak. In 1972, there were 1,250 miles of road, of which 250 were paved. Construction continues at an accelerated pace and when the Sibu-Bintulu road is terminated in 1978, Sarawak will have for the first time, a road through its whole length.

Since 1963, Malaysia has invested more than \$400 million Malaysian (US\$160 million) on roads. The cost is very high because of the many rivers that must be crossed, the lack of good quality sand and rock, and the tropical rains (100 to 200 inches per year) that erode the embankments.

But Malaysia is pushing forward in an effort to improve national unity by facilitating communications between the Chinese cities and the indigenous populations of the rural areas. The government means also to provide access to new lands for the Chinese population and to settle along the roads the people of the interior who use large areas of valuable land for shifting agriculture. It is hoped that the indigenous populations